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Is Snopes.com infallible?



By [Drew Zahn](#)
Published March 9, 2009 at 8:55pm

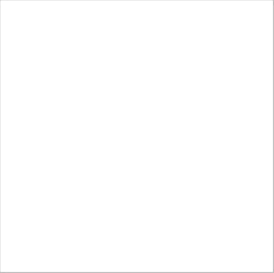
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Millions of Americans, including national leaders, who rely on the popular online hoax-buster [Snopes.com](#) as the ultimate authority in separating truth from fiction, may be surprised to learn that behind the Wizard's curtain, is just a husband and wife doing research on their own.



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In fact, Snopes, routinely cited by many as the final word on both frivolous and important stories, is not the well-staffed think tank of researchers, journalists and computer hacks one might expect – but rather, the work of David and Barbara Mikkelsen, living in a Los Angeles suburb.

And though Snopes arguably deserves the popularity it has accrued over the years, many have come to regard the site as virtually infallible – which it definitely is not, say critics. Yet today, major news organizations such as [the Associated Press](#) and [MSNBC](#) cite Snopes as a definitive source for determining accuracy in suspicious stories. Six to 8 million viewers visit the site monthly. [National Review Online](#) calls Snopes "indispensable."

In fact, as [WND has reported](#), a U.S. senator recently dismissed an issue as significant as determining the eligibility of Barack Obama to serve as president based on the word of Snopes.

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Where's the proof Barack Obama was born in the U.S. or that he fulfills the "natural-born American" clause in the Constitution? If you still want to see it, join more than 320,000 others and sign up now!

"Rumors pertaining to [Obama's] citizenship status have been circulating on the Internet," wrote Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., to a constituent, "and this information has been debunked by Snopes.com, which investigates the truth behind Internet rumors."

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Some, however, question whether Snopes merits its reputation as an unbiased, accurate source for debunking controversial issues as "myth," including WND's Joseph Farah.

"Some of you are shocked to hear Snopes is not the last word on truth – that it is not the bible of rumors and urban legends," [Farah wrote in a column](#) criticizing not just the website's pronouncements on whether or not a story is a myth, but also how its writer (usually Barbara Mikkelsen) determines what does and doesn't qualify as a reliable source.

Bias in myth-busting?

Some critics argue that embedded in the explanations of Snopes conclusions is a political or social bias, citing the great American essayist E.B. White, who wrote, "I have yet to see a piece of writing, political or non-political, that does not have a slant. All writing slants the way a writer leans, and no man is born perpendicular."

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Snopes even became the subject of an Internet myth itself, a widely distributed e-mail claiming it was owned by "a flaming liberal in the tank for Obama" and that TruthOrFiction.com was

a less biased myth-busting website.

In response, the Mikkelsons claim to be as neutral as possible and reject the political activist label.

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"We have no sponsors, investors, or partners, nor do we have any affiliation or relationship (financial or otherwise) with any political party, religious group, business organization, or any other group or agency," states [the Snopes FAQ page](#). "We pay all the costs of producing and operating this website ourselves and derive our income from the advertising it provides."

For its part, the [TruthOrFiction](#) website mentioned in some of the critical e-mails even produced a piece on the rumor that Snopes "is a secret tool of the Democratic Party to Promote Barack Obama," labeling the accusation as "fiction."

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WND asked David Mikkelson what safeguards might be in place to prevent bias from creeping into its articles.

"Our safeguard is the millions of readers (including major news organizations, government agencies, universities, and authors) who value our site's long-established reputation for fairness, accuracy, and reliability," Mikkelson responded. "We would not maintain such a reputation if we did not consistently apply objective standards in our reporting."

What about the sources Snopes uses?

Other critics question the process of how the Mikkelsons choose sources they consider definitive in determining truth.

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Mikkelson told WND Snopes considers several factors in determining if a source is trustworthy, including the source's history of reliability, corroboration of other sources, tangible evidence and independent verification of the source's information.

The Mikkelsons admit, however, that Snopes is only as reliable as the sources it cites, and they invite readers to look for the

truth themselves.

"We don't expect anyone to accept us as the ultimate authority on any topic, which is why our site's name indicates that it contains *reference* pages," states [the Snopes FAQ page](#). "The research materials we've used in the preparation of any particular page are listed ... so that readers who wish to verify the validity of our information may check those sources for themselves."

When Farah wrote about Snopes in his "[Beware the Internet!](#)" [column](#), his criticism keyed in on the website's choice of sources.

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Snopes was investigating claims that the Environmental Protection Agency was covering over safety concerns with compact fluorescent light bulbs. In determining the concerns a myth, however, [Snopes cited as evidence the EPA](#).

"Notice the sources Snopes relies upon to conclude beyond any doubt CFLs don't pose a serious health threat to anyone," Farah writes, "the same government agency pushing CFLs. Where I come from (nearly 30 years of solid journalism experience), this is not considered good reporting. This is not considered the best way to seek truth and enlightenment or even objective facts."

In the case of reports and dozens of lawsuits arguing that Barack Obama may not actually be constitutionally eligible to serve as president, Snopes has determined that Obama – despite his refusal to release his long-form birth certificate (which names the delivering hospital, doctor and other specifics) to the press or the courts – is a natural born citizen and eligible to serve as president.

The hoax-buster's choice of sources in making the determination, however, has again led to criticism.

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[The Snopes conclusion](#) refers to an image posted on another website, FactCheck, which in turn cites as documentation of Obama's Hawaiian birth a "Certification of Live Birth" that the Obama campaign posted during 2008.

Critics, however, have pointed out that the "Certification of Live Birth" posted online is not, in fact, the same as a "Birth Certificate," and COLBs have been issued by Hawaii to parents whose children are not even born in the state.

California lawyer Orly Taitz, whose work is on her [Defend Our Freedoms Foundation](#) website, has written to state lawmakers across the nation, confronting the Snopes explanation directly:

"The State of Hawaii, statute 338, allows foreign born children of Hawaiian residents to get a Hawaiian birth certificate. Mr. Obama has never presented any corroborating evidence that he was actually born in Hawaii. His paternal grandmother in Kenya and the ambassador of Kenya made statements that he was born in Kenya," she said.

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"The image that Mr. Obama has posted on the Internet was not a valid birth certificate, but rather a limited value document, called Short Version Certification of Live Birth. The Certification of Live Birth does not name a hospital, name a doctor, have any signatures or a seal of the Hawaiian Health Department on the front of the document. This document is usually given to parties that don't have a proper hospital birth certificate and it is given based on a statement of one relative only. Even the state of Hawaii doesn't give full credit to these documents," she continued.

Taitz has suggested the records from the "Annenberg FactCheck" cited by Snopes be subpoenaed "as to how did they claim to have examined Obama's birth certificate and found it valid. Neither the state of Hawaii, nor Obama has ever released such birth certificate, and there is no evidence of Obama being born in any hospital in Hawaii."

While Snopes and its critics may be at odds over the sources Snopes uses – and thus in disagreement over how reliable the site may be in every case – they do agree on one principle:

"I've got to tell you, you can't believe everything you read on the Internet," writes Farah. "You've got to use common sense and discernment in sorting out the good from the bad."

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Drew Zahn

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Drew Zahn covers movies for WND as a contributing writer. A former pastor, he is the editor of seven books, including [Movie-Based Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching](#), which sparked his ongoing love affair with film and his weekly WND column, "Popcorn and a (world)view." Drew currently serves as communications director for [The Family Leader](#).

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